

Study reveals undemocratic federal candidate nomination process

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Only 17 per cent of candidates arrived through a competitive nomination race

OTTAWA — If you think the race for who will represent you in Parliament happens on election day, think again.

One of the most important parts of the democratic process, candidate nomination, happens months earlier, and a recent study has found that in most cases, it's not really a race at all.

In fact, looking at thousands of federal candidate nomination races since 2004, the Samara Centre for Democracy revealed a process that is often undemocratic, lacking in transparency and highly variable by party.

"If you read about nominations, it's likely an interesting nomination and so you get the impression that they're more contested than they are, because it wouldn't make a great headline otherwise," said Paul Thomas, senior research associate with the Samara Centre for Democracy.

"It's an unrealistic view that we have of this fight for local democracy."

The study, called Party Favours: How Federal Election Candidates are Chosen, found that of more than 6,600 federal candidates captured in the study, only 17 per cent arrived there through a competitive nomination race. Moreover, parties directly appointed more than 2,700 election candidates with no nomination contest at all, and more than 70 per cent of the 3,900 nomination contests had just a single person running.

Election candidates by method of selection by party by year - 2004 to 2015

SOURCE: Samara Centre for Democracy

Parties ruled the nomination process, the study found. It's up to parties to decide when contests open and close, who can and can't run in a contest, and whether an incumbent MP can stand again as a candidate without facing a contest.

The study also found a lack of transparency — parties have no requirement to release information on how many votes were cast or how many contestants were prevented from running.

As for the people who do make it on the ballot?

"It tends to be most likely those who are already well connected in the parties that are going to be putting themselves forward," said Thomas.

Excessive control

While the classic parachute candidate — when a party takes someone from its ranks and sends them to a riding they have no connection with — has fallen mostly by the wayside in recent years, Thomas said parties still work the system to their advantage.

For starters, in all cases, it's the parties that have control over the timing and length of their candidate nomination process, not the individual riding associations.

The length of a race is important, the study points out, as potential candidates will want to sign up new party members who will support them in the race. It's a concept Thomas called "bring-your-own-voters."

The study reveals that most nomination campaigns are in fact short — half last just three weeks or less. Moreover, during the period measured, there were 253 nominations that opened and closed on the same day and more than 450 closed in five days or less.

According to the report, short nomination periods are less likely to see strong competition featuring contestants who aren't already plugged into the party, for the simple reason that they may not know a contest is happening until it's too late.

"Party members need to be registered for a certain number of days before the nomination contest happens," Thomas said. "In some cases, retroactive deadlines are set ... so even if you'd already signed up your members before you knew the nomination was happening, your members will still not be able to vote."

One method to make the process more fair, Thomas said, would be to replace the current ad-hoc system with set nomination deadlines.

Another way parties can manipulate the outcome of the nominations is through the vetting process.

To run for a nomination for a major party, a candidate must be approved by the party, and parties have complete control over vetting. Often, parties choose to exclude candidates for any number of reasons, such as questionable social media activity or a criminal record.

But, the report points out, parties also have no obligation to disclose any information on the vetting process to Elections Canada.

Thomas said there's no publicly available data on how many people are excluded by parties through vetting, and when asked, only the Green Party disclosed the info (for what it's worth, Thomas said their exclusion rate was low.)

"The question is if the parties vetted out five people each in the election, that's not a big deal," he said. "If the parties vetted out 500 people each in the election, then that's a bigger concern."

Of course, there's nothing stopping someone from forgoing all this and running as an independent, but as the study highlights, 99 per cent of members of Parliament over the last 30 years were elected as representatives of a political party.

Duff Conacher, co-founder of Democracy Watch and adjunct professor of politics and law at the University of Ottawa, said major parties currently yield too much power when it comes to candidate nomination.

Conservative MP Michael Chong's Reform Act attempted to remove the power from the party leader to choose election candidates, but Conacher said the bill was watered down to the point of being largely ineffective by the time it was passed under Harper in 2015.

"What needs to happen is Elections Canada should be overseeing every nomination race, just like Elections Canada oversees the general election," Conacher said.

Lack of diversity

Other than having what some would argue is an undemocratic level of control over who appears on the ballot, the current nomination system also does little to combat the lack of gender equality in Canadian politics.

"There's research showing that there's no competitive disadvantage to being a woman in an election — voters are just as likely to support a woman as they are a man — but there are fewer women who get onto the ballot," Thomas said,

Nomination contestant gender 2004-2015

SOURCE: Samara Centre for Democracy

The study found that women made up just 28 per cent of nomination contestants, and that those inequalities from the nominations are reflected even when candidates are appointed. These figures varied little by province but quite a bit by party, with the Conservatives least likely to have a strong female-to-male candidate ratio and the NDP the most likely.

"If you want to have a Parliament that's more representative, in many cases focusing on Parliament is quite too late, focusing on the election is a little too late," Thomas said. "What we really need to do is go back to the nomination stage."

Nasha Brownridge, national spokeswoman for Equal Voice Canada, a group that tracks the gender divide in politics, said beyond the many systemic barriers that exist, such as the fact that women are still the primary caregivers in many families, research has found that women, on average, need to be asked many times before they decide to run and want to be supported along the way.

"Each party has its own nomination process, with its own complexities that can at times affect the number of women running for nomination, especially where there is a large number of male incumbents," Brownridge said. "If we want to see more women seeking nominations across the political spectrum, political parties need to make sure they are actively recruiting and equipping women to run."

The Samara centre's full report can be accessed online at samaracanada.com.

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